

DON'T JUST REMEMBER. CARRY THE TORCH.

Thank you.
And good morning.

I want to thank everyone who came out today, because your presence here and now is a sign of patriotism and love for our great nation, and just as importantly, respect for the fallen.

MEMORIAL DAY, I believe, is the most patriotic and important of all of the national holidays: More than the Fourth of July, which celebrates our nation's founding, and more than Veterans Day, which pays tribute to our nation's living military veterans. MEMORIAL DAY is our annual reminder to remember those soldiers, sailors marines and airmen who made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our United States, the men and women who once walked among us, but who walk among us no more, who fought ... *and sadly, died* while protecting and defending our freedom and our American way of life.

Memorial Day is so much more than just a long weekend, or the start of the summer season.

The American tradition of honoring our war dead started more than 150 years ago in the years after the Civil War, when veterans of that war began holding ceremonies to honor their comrades and place flowers on the graves of the fallen. DECORATION DAY, as it was then called, fell at the end of May, because ... that's when flowers are naturally in bloom. Though the holiday has since been renamed to MEMORIAL DAY, the purpose stays the same.

Freedom isn't free. It's easy to forget! Especially in the busy hustle and bustle of our day-to-day lives. But, to remain free as people requires constant vigilance in a world of ever-present danger.

That's why our military exists—to protect and defend our nation, our borders, and the freedoms enshrined in our Constitution that we hold so dear. Without conscription or a military draft, our country is only able to exist because brave individuals like my friend, Army Staff Sgt Matthew Weikert, have had the courage to step up, volunteer and serve.

Matt Weikert was a heck of a guy. He was a fellow JHS graduate in the class of 2000, and I have fond memories of us together as young athletes on the soccer fields of Jacksonville. Matt had a great sense of humor, he loved being around people and people loved being around Matt. He was a son, a father, and a brother, not just to his sisters, Meghan and Melissa, but to dozens of Marines and Army soldiers with whom he served.

Matt enlisted in the Marines in 2001, not long after myself. Though we never served in the same unit, we sent each other messages and kept in touch. Matt was never content to sit on the sidelines or watch others do the work, and not surprisingly, he had an impressive military career as a grunt Marine and soldier. As a Marine, Matt deployed to Iraq three separate times, each trip dangerous on its own, and when his period of volunteer service came to an end, he then re-enlisted in the Army with the 101st Airborne. Matt deployed twice more with 101st Airborne, first to Iraq and then Afghanistan where, on his fifth combat deployment, he was killed by an Improvised Explosive Device while on a mission.

Though it is hard to imagine that eleven years have passed since his death in 2010, it goes without saying that United States of America would not exist without people like Matt Weikert.

Matt Weikert was the embodiment of America. He was the best this country has to offer. He really, truly believed in freedom and a free society, in protecting the powerless and less fortunate, and not shying away from danger. He was committed a better world for his friends and loved ones, and he stood ready to defend their lives, even if it meant sacrificing his own.

Scripture tells us that “No one shows greater love than when he lays down his life for his friends.” Matt Weikert showed us that. His service to others and ultimate sacrifice is the embodiment “no greater love.”

So it is not enough to simply remember or recall the existence of Matt Weikert, or any of the other fallen heroes, as a fleeting thought, or in a ceremony held once each year. We have to do more. We have to honor their lives, their courage, their conviction, and the sacrifices they made on our behalf. When American patriots like Matt Weikert fall on the battlefield, it becomes OUR RESPONSIBILITY to ensure that THEIR SPIRIT never dies.

We have to PICK UP AND CARRY THEIR TORCH.

PICK UP AND CARRY THE TORCH of the fallen in your daily life and all that you do.

CARRY the torch that Matt Weikert was carrying when he died.

Life in a way that honors his sacrifice, and CARRY THE TORCH OF FREEDOM in your heart.

When conflict arises in your daily life, as it always does, think about that torch of MATT WEIKERT, or the torch carried by any other fallen soldier, and do your part to pick up where they left off and keep their spirit alive. Be the best American and the best person that you can possibly be. When the going gets tough, think about Matt Weikert, and keep going.

Remembering their lives once a year is not enough. This MEMORIAL DAY, and every day moving forward, we must do more than just remember: we must PICK UP AND CARRY THE TORCH of love and freedom, because that is how to truly honor the service and sacrifice of brave American patriots like Matt Weikert.

Thank you, God bless you and may God bless the United States of America.

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